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Autobiography of Stephen A. Douglas

FRANK E. STEVENS

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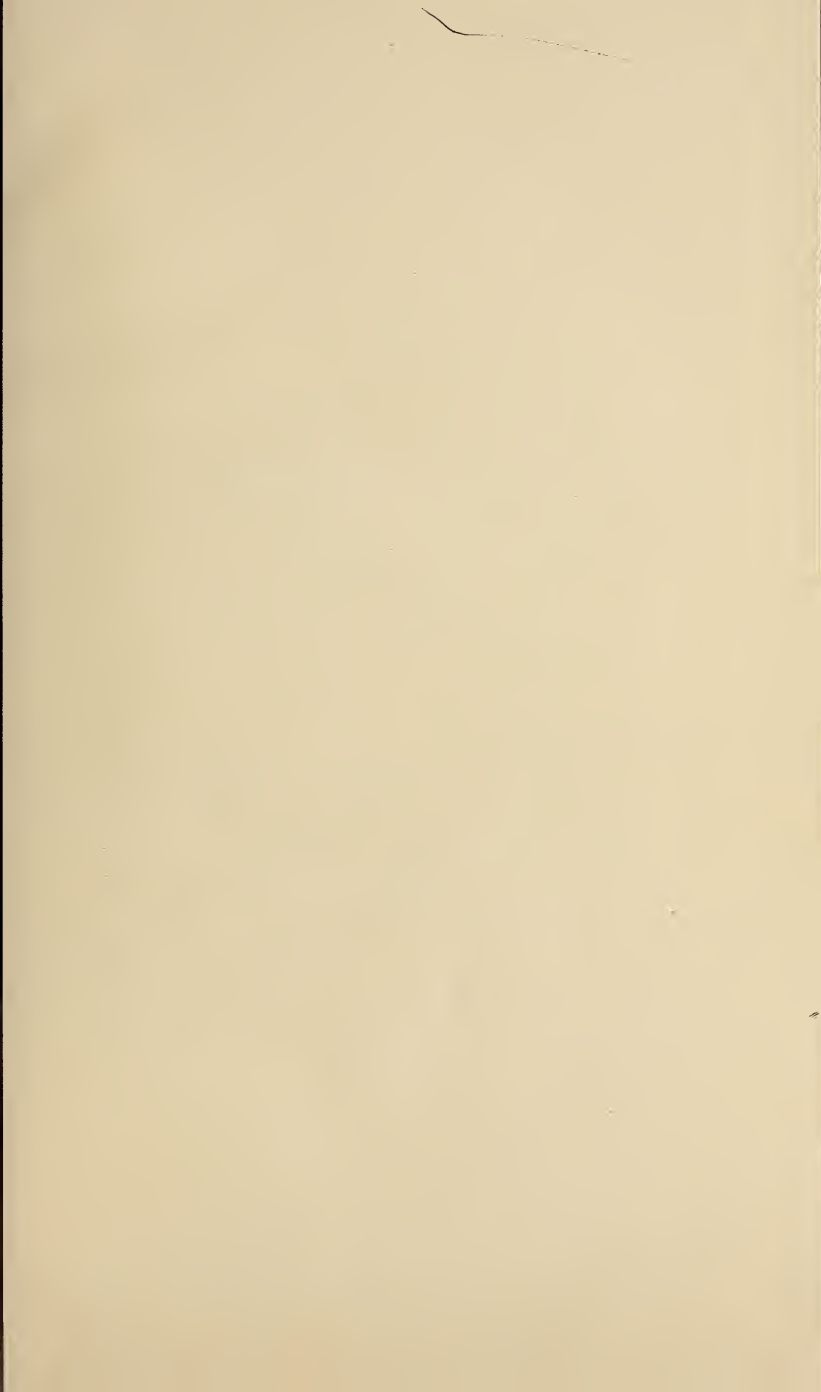
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STEPHEN ARNOLD DOUGLAS.

From daguerreotype owned by his son, Hon. Robert M. Douglas.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS.

FRANK E. STEVENS, DIXON, ILL.

While collecting material for a biographical study of Stephen Arnold Douglas, Judge Robert M. Douglas of North Carolina, a son, kindly loaned me this little autobiography. Added to the story as told me personally by the late Colonel John Dement and the sketch published years ago in Harper's Monthly Magazine by Daniel Roberts, we now are enabled for the first time to secure a correct knowledge of the early life of Douglas.

When Stephen A. Douglas kissed his mother good bye at the homestead gate near Canandaigua, New York, her last inquiry was: "And when shall you come home to visit us, my son?" "On my way to Congress, mother," he answered. And so the first visit was to be made ten years afterwards, almost to a day. Douglas started westward determined to make for himself a political career. Just what point he should seek was undetermined; so at Cleveland, he tarried with relatives for the purpose of getting his bearings. With the personal manipulation of those bearings, Douglas had so little to do that it might be said he literally drifted until circumstances, none of them propitious, landed him, sick, footsore from his ten mile walk from Exeter, at the end of a raw day of November, in the little village of Winchester, then in the county of Morgan, in the State of Illinois.

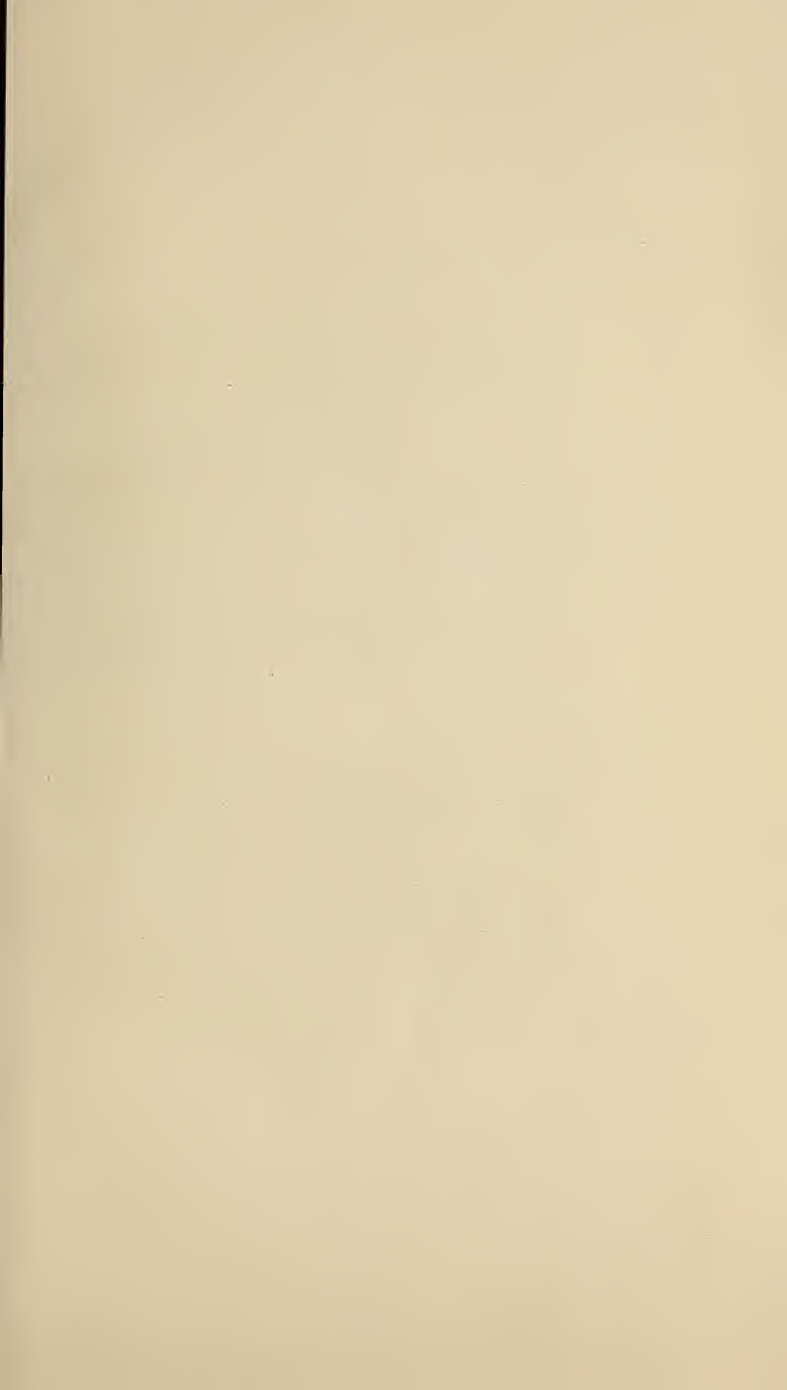
He was so worn by his long sickness that he could scarcely stagger along the road, yet he walked bravely forward with but a shilling in money as the total of his worldly possessions. He presented his boyish but courageous face to the landlord and asked for a credit in board until he could secure pupils enough to warrant his remaining in Winchester. Like the western tavern keeper of his time, that one was charmed by the manly little chap who requested it. He read in his big eyes the

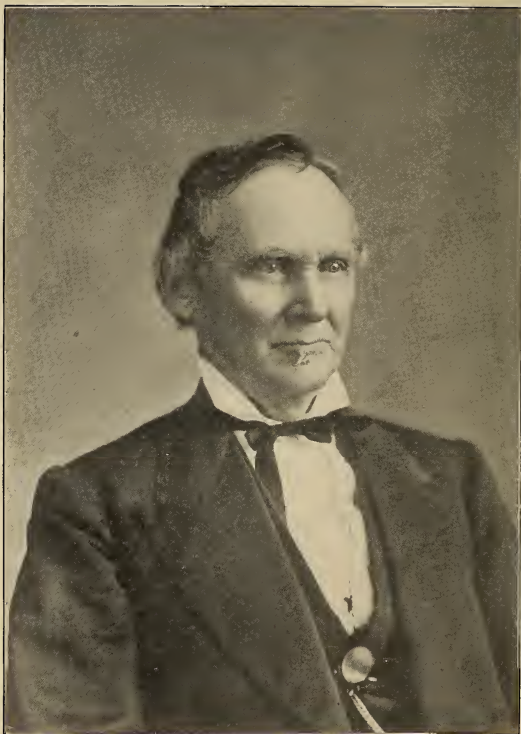
story of an honest purpose, pursued disastrously, yet so valiantly and persistently, that failure could not be possible. The incredible courage of the youngster aroused the sympathy of the village and almost before Douglas went to bed that night 40 pupils had been secured for the little school he desired to teach and from which he hoped to earn money enough to start him in his chosen profession of the law. Had he been permitted to go on to Pekin that environment might not have prevented his subsequent political achievements, but the location certainly would have retarded his progress many years. Jacksonville was the most important city in the state at the time. The ablest lawyers of the state practiced there. It was the pole star among Illinois cities. Everything which had political ambition behind it pointed to Jacksonville. It was the home of Gen. John J. Hardin, said to be the most brilliant and one of the ablest men in the state. To incur his displeasure was regarded by many as political suicide whether the poor victim was of the same political faith or not. When Douglas came to town, Hardin could not bend forward far enough to find the youngster and so the youngster remained unnoticed until the states attorney incident was brought to notice by John Wyatt who had been a member of the eighth General Assembly, 1832-34. The incident excites laughter in Illinois to this very day when related. Douglas weighed but ninety pounds at the time and was only five feet four inches tall, while Wyatt was over six feet, angular, broad-shouldered and naturally when looking down on his companion when with him, he grew to call him "Little Douglas". In manner too, Wyatt was a typical westerner; a Kentuckian, rough and ready, fearless, adroit and possessed of a vocabulary which on occasion would frighten a fish woman. In the ungentle art of tongue lashing, no man in Illinois could face him. This man early became attached to Douglas and ever continued a helpful associate.

Wyatt planned his campaign with military precision and with the genius of a great general. When he knew how the legislature stood politically, he took particular pains to make a street scene and declare his intentions thus: "Wouldn't it be fun to beat Hardin with little Douglas!" Wyatt loaned Douglas a horse. Arrived at Vandalia the state capital, not a room could be found. In despair Wyatt approached Major John Dement then state treasurer, a man of great political weight,



COL. JOHN J. HARDIN.





MAJOR JOHN DEMENT.

a former member of the legislature and a man of the same height as Douglas, five feet four, though somewhat stouter. Dement invited Douglas to share his room. After settling that important detail he took Douglas to a barber shop ordered a hair cut and a shave for the young man and together they sallied forth to get votes to carry the measure through. Douglas was dressed in blue jeans, considerably too short in the arm and the leg, but that was a day when coat and pants cut little figure in politics or for that matter, social life. Under the guiding spirit of Dement, Douglas made famous progress. Very soon the conspiracy reached the ears of Governor Duncan, a great friend of Hardin's. At once the governor approached Dement and remonstrated against the latter's interest in the little unknown stranger. Before leaving he requested Dement as the political favor of a lifetime to urge a few friends to vote against the bill.

Now it happened that just a few weeks previous, Dement had been a candidate for state treasurer and he wanted certain votes of legislators. Accordingly he had approached Duncan and asked him to intercede with some of the members for votes. Greatly offended, Governor Duncan somewhat haughtily declined with the statement that it would be altogether too undignified for him to ask a member of the legislature for his vote. Therefore when Duncan approached Dement on a mission identical with his own, Dement drew his five feet of manhood to its highest point and declared it would be altogether undignified for him to ask a member of the legislature to vote against a personal bill. The next day with the help of Wyatt and Dement the bill was passed and Douglas was elected later on.

The personality of that boy with his boyish insistence and courage was the same when he solicited a seat in the United States Senate. He was a boy on the day of his death, an affectionate and altogether irresistible boy, ambitious, resourceful, voluble, but never a gushing boy. It seemed as though he was just as alert the day he entered the village of Winchester and looked into the barroom of the hotel with its crackling fire as he was when fighting the attacks made against him for the part he took in repealing the Missouri Compromise. The only difference between Douglas at twenty and Douglas at forty was twenty years.

When he stood upon the corner watching the progress of the administrator's sale, he attracted the attention of the administrator just as he attracted attention on the floor of the Senate afterwards. The boy was just as magnetic. He was but a boy when he made his famous race for Congress against Stuart at 29 and came within 35 votes of beating him in a strong Whig district. On the canal dump he held the laborers spellbound. Were he to enter the supreme court room half an hour later, he held the judges just as closely.

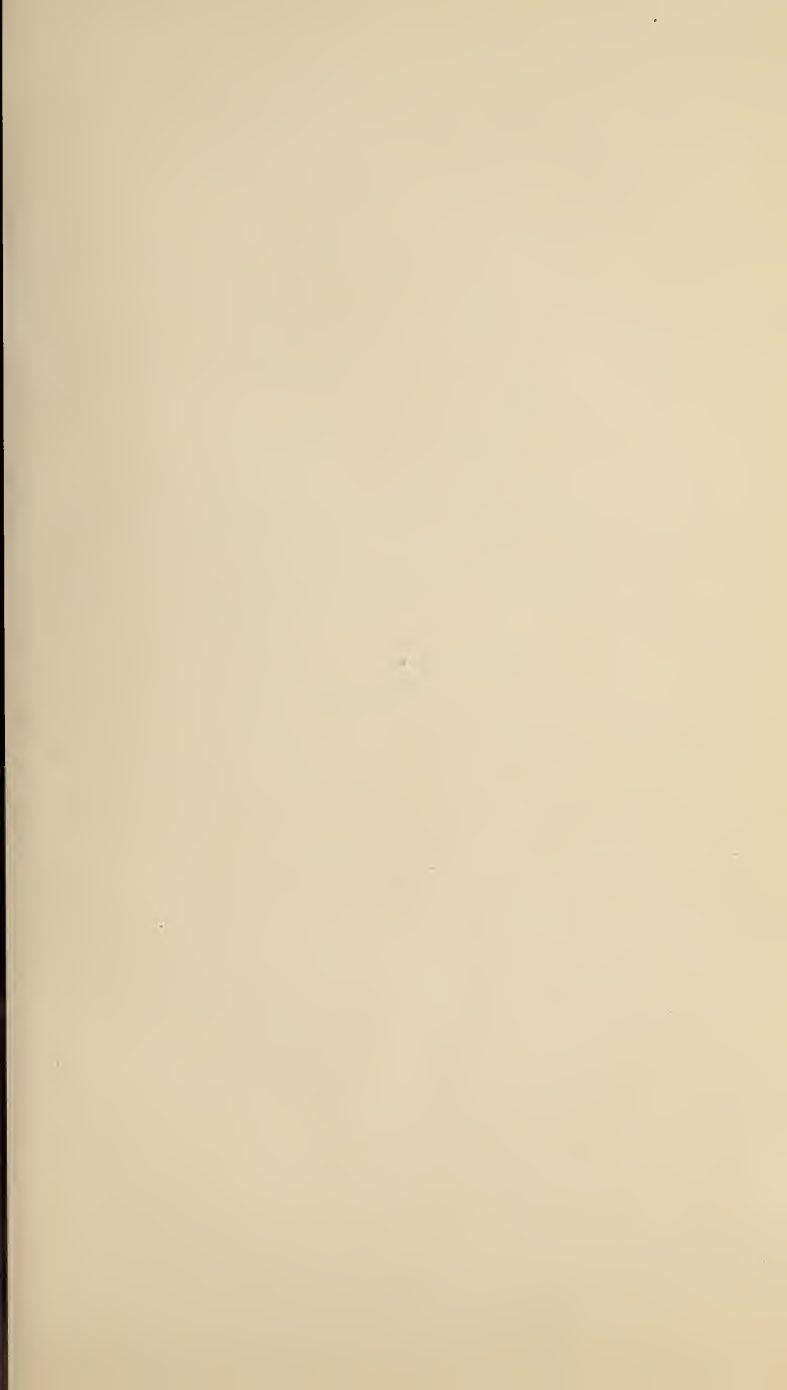
At Winchester he extended his acquaintance. He attended a debating society and strengthened his forensic powers. On Saturdays he tried law suits before the village squire. He attended house raisings. He was economical and industrious and in the spring he emerged with something like \$100.00 in money to tide him over the professional drought in Jacksonville. But his master stroke at Winchester was the action which secured to him the lasting friendship of S. S. Brooks, the leading journalist of the day in Illinois.

While at Winchester he received a prospectus from Brooks in effect stating that if a list could be secured in Morgan county, he would start a Jackson newspaper at Jacksonville. With his customary unselfishness and vigor he secured for Brooks a large number of subscribers. Brooks thereafter became the publicity manager for Douglas. His constant attention to the wants of others without the expectation of reward; his ability to make lasting friendships remained through life just as it had been pursued at little Winchester. He had been there but a few days when a merchant named Miner became so attracted towards him that he asked Douglas to share his room with him and "batch it" in their joint efforts to save some money. Shortly afterwards Miner lost his heart to a young lady and the partnership with Douglas was dissolved. Upon request to "stand up" with Miner, Douglas was compelled to decline because he owned no boiled shirt. It was a common enough occurrence in those days to be without one. In fact the man who owned one was out of the ordinary amongst his fellow man. Miner happened to be one of the few who owned not only one but two and one of the two was loaned Douglas to take part in the important event with his very warm friend, Miner.



S. S. BROOKS.

The Jacksonville editor who pushed Douglas' political fortunes and resigned his candidacy upon the Democratic ticket in favor of Douglas, who was elected.





Birthplace of Douglas in Brandon, Vermont.

Numerous biographies of Douglas have been written, but in every one this part of his early life has been garbled badly especially, the lonely and very long and painful walk to Winchester. In this little autobiography, but lately known to exist, the names of his old benefactors have been given, thus correcting the traditions so long believed. It sets at rest the gossip which has been permitted to become history. More than ever before, it recites how little he had to do with the control of his destiny, though with the charming personality which it discloses, Douglas in any environment would have risen far above the multitude.

This autobiography was written in a little memorandum or pass book with a pencil. It was written with no more intention for publicity than another would put into his diary when he noticed a visit to a friend or commented on the weather, although in the first two lines there might have been concealed the thought that some day he expected greater things. "For the purpose of refreshing my mind in future upon subjects that might otherwise be forgotten," he wrote. But if he did have the hope for preferment, little he could have dreamed of the power he was destined to wield in twelve short years from that date, when Webster and Clay and Calhoun and Benton listened to him and when after the "Omnibus Bill" had failed to pass in the vain fight for a compromise, his separate bills were taken up one after another and passed as the compromise measures of 1850.

Douglas the man and senator grown, was Douglas the boy back at Winchester, earnest, impulsive, generous—but a boy none the less.

AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH OF STEPHEN A. DOUGLAS,
SEPTEMBER 1, 1838.

I this day commence this memorandum or journal of passing events for the purpose of refreshing my mind in future upon subjects that might otherwise be forgotten. It may be well to turn my attention to the past as well as the future, and record such facts as are within my recollection or have come to my knowledge, and may be interesting or useful to myself or others hereafter.

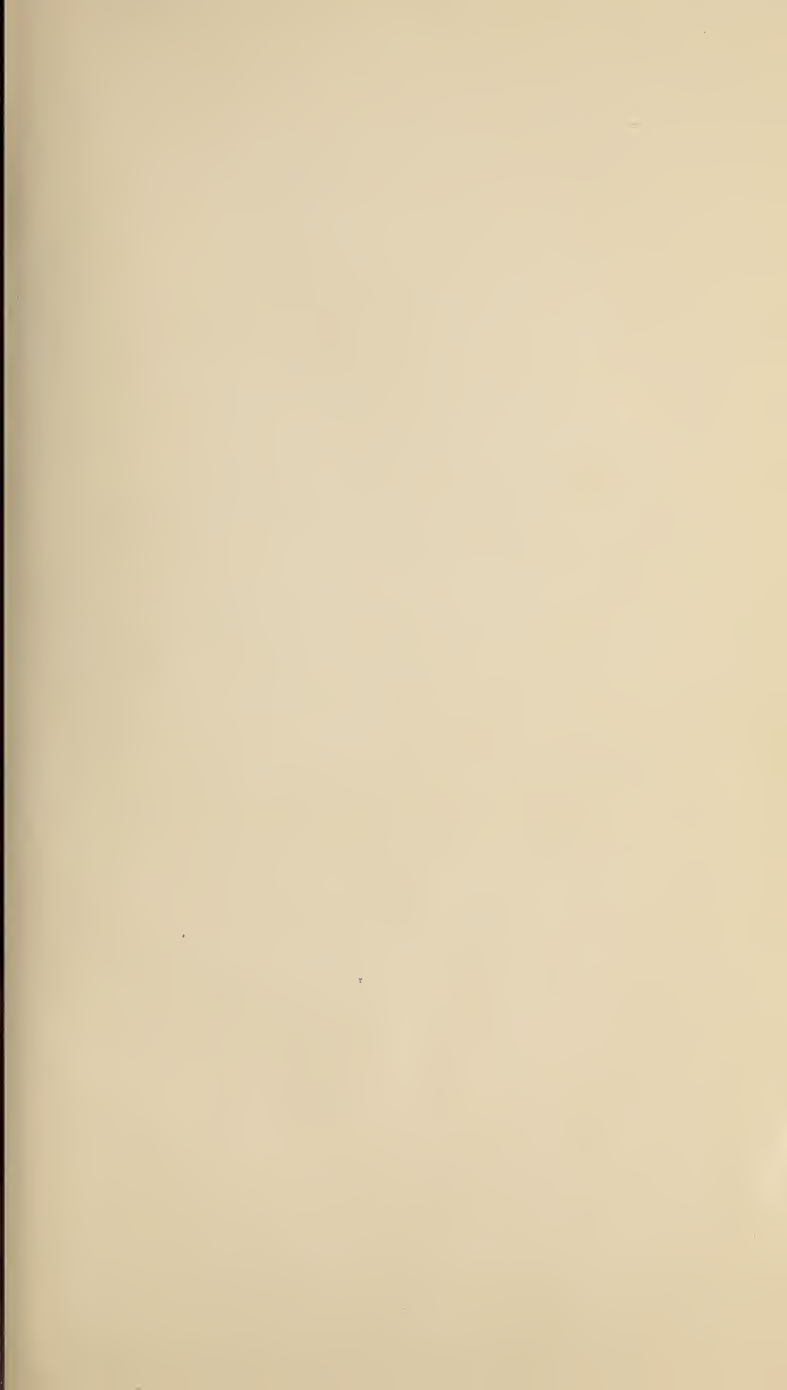
I learn from my mother that I was born in the town of Brandon in the County of Rutland and State of Vermont on the 23d day of April, 1813. My father, Stephen A. Douglas, was a graduate of Middlebury

College, a physician by profession, and a man very much beloved by all who knew him. I only speak of my father as I have always heard others speak of him, for he died when I was only about two months old, and of course I cannot recollect him. I have often been told that he was holding me in his arms when he departed this world. My mother, who thank God yet lives, was a Miss Sarah Fisk before she was married. My parents had but two children, my sister Sarah A. Douglas (who has since married Julius N. Granger of Manchester Centre, Ontario county, N. Y.) and myself. Upon the death of my father, my mother moved to a small farm left her by her father about three miles north of my native village, and resided with her brother Edward Fisk, who was an industrious, economical, clever old bachelor, and wanted some one to keep house for him. This arrangement suited them both as their farms joined, and each was so situated as to need the aid of the other. Here I lived with my mother and uncle upon the farm until I was about fifteen years of age, and then determined to select some other mode of living. I had no great aversion to working on a farm, nor was I much dissatisfied with my good old uncle, but thought him rather a hard master, and unwilling to give me those opportunities of improvement and education which I thought I was entitled to. I had enjoyed the benefits of a common school education three months each year, and had been kept diligently at work the rest of the time. I thought it a hardship that my uncle would have the use of my mother's farm and also the benefit of my labour without any other equivalent than my boarding and clothes. I therefore determined upon leaving my home and my true friends, and see what I could do for myself in the wide world among strangers. My mother remonstrated, warned me of the dangers and temptations to which young men are exposed, and insisted upon my selecting some trade or engaging in some business that would give me a steady home and regular employment. I promised to comply with her wishes, that is, keep good company, or in other words keep out of bad company, avoid all immoral and vicious practices, attend church regularly, and obey the regulations of my employer; in short I promised everything she wanted, if she would consent to my leaving home. Accordingly in the Spring of 1828, being about fifteen years of age, I bid my mother, sister and uncle farewell, and left home for Middlebury, about fourteen miles



SARAH GRANGER.

Mother of Stephen A. Douglas. From portrait owned by her grandson, Judge Robert M. Douglas.





The Old Academy, Canandaigua, N. Y.

distant,¹ and engaged to learn the Cabinet making trade with one Nahum Parker. I put on my apron and went to work, sawing table legs from two inch plank, making wash stands, bed steads, &c., &c. I was delighted with the change of home and employment. There was a novelty about it that rendered it peculiarly interesting. My labor furnished exercise for the mind as well as the body. I have never been placed in any situation or been engaged in any business which I enjoyed to so great an extent as the cabinet shop. I then felt contented and happy, and never aspired to any other distinction than that connected with my trade and improvements in the arts. Towards the end of the year I became dissatisfied with my employer in consequence of his insisting upon my performing some menial services in the house. I was willing to do anything connected with the shop but could not consent to perform the duties of a servant in the house. A difficulty soon arose between Mr. Parker and his wife and myself, and resulted in my leaving him and returning home. So much was I attached to the life of a mechanic, I could not content myself at home and soon got a situation in the shop of Deacon Caleb Knowlton, a cabinet maker in Brandon, my native village. I remained with my new employer about a year, and pursued my business strictly, as all the apprentices in the shop were required to do. Whilst I lived with Mr. Parker I formed a taste for reading, particularly political works, by being associated with a number of young men who spent their time nights and Sundays in reading and study. At this time politics ran high in the presidential election between General Jackson and J. Q. Adams. My associate apprentices and myself were warm advocates of Gen. Jackson's claims, whilst our employer was an ardent supporter of Mr. Adams and Mr. Clay. From this moment my politics became fixed, and all subsequent reading, reflection and observation have but confirmed my early attachment to the cause of Democracy.

In the winter of 1829 and 1830 I was taken sick and compelled to return home. My physicians informed me that my physical strength was too feeble to enable me to work at the cabinet business, and that it would be necessary for me to select some other occupation. Finding my health too feeble to work in the shop, I commenced going to school

¹ Walked.

at the Academy in Brandon, under the direction of J. N. Chipman, and continued under his instruction until the fall of 1830, when I removed to Canandaigua, Ontario county, N. Y. My sister had previously married Julius N. Granger, and removed to his residence in Manchester Centre, Ontario County, N. Y., and this year, 1830, my mother married his father; and now the father and mother and only son and only daughter became united in one family where they continue to reside in the enjoyment of peace, plenty and happiness. Upon removing to the State of New York in December, 1830, I became a student in the Academy in Canandaigua under the superintendence of Prof. Henry Howe, where I continued until the latter part of 1832. Whilst connected with the Academy at Canandaigua I devoted myself zealously to my studies, the Greek and Latin languages, mathematics, rhetoric, logic, &c., and made considerable improvement.

About the 1st of January, 1833, I left the Academy and entered the office of Walter & Levi Hubbell as a student at law. I pursued my law studies diligently five days in the week, and the sixth I spent in reviewing my classical studies, until sometime in the month of June in that year. Finding myself in straightened pecuniary circumstances, and knowing my mother's inability to support me through a regular course of law studies, which would continue about four years longer according to the statutes of New York requiring a course of seven years classical and legal study before admission to the bar, I determined upon removing to the western country and relying upon my own efforts for a support henceforth. My mother and relatives remonstrated, urging that I was too young and inexperienced for such an adventure; but finding my resolution fixed and unchangeable, they reluctantly consented, and kindly furnished me with three hundred dollars, the last of my patrimony, with which to pay my expenses. On the 24th of June, 1833 (being 20 years of age) I bid farewell to my friends, and started alone for the "great west," without having any particular place of destination in view. The first night I arrived at Buffalo, and thence took a trip to the Battle Grounds of Chippewa, Niagara, the Falls &c., &c., and returning to Buffalo in a few days, I embarked on a steam boat for Cleveland, Ohio. Arriving at Cleveland I presented a few letters of introduction to some gentlemen of that place which I had received from Messrs.



Law office of
Walter
Hubbell.



Douglas Desk.



Historical Museum, Canandaigua, N. Y.

Francis Granger, Mark H. Sibley and other kind friends. By means of these letters I immediately became acquainted with Sherlock J. Andrews, Esq., an accomplished and intelligent gentleman and distinguished lawyer of that city. Being pleased with Cleveland and its prospects for business, and also with the few acquaintances I formed there, I immediately determined upon remaining there. By the statutes of Ohio I was required to pursue the study of law one year within the limits of that State before I could be admitted to practice. For this purpose Mr. Andrews was kind enough to offer me the use of his office and library, which I gladly accepted, and entered upon my studies with increased spirit and zeal. In a very few days however, I found myself prostrate upon my bed with the bilious fever, and was confined until some time in the month of October, about four months.² This sickness has often since been, and still continues to be, the subject of the most serious and profound reflection. My condition, the circumstances with which I was surrounded, the doubtful and sometimes hopeless issue, and especially my feelings, thoughts, and meditations, are all now fresh in my mind. I was among entire strangers. During the whole time I never saw a face I had ever seen before; I was so feeble as to be entirely helpless, unable even to turn myself in bed; I was advised by my physicians that there was no reasonable hope of my recovery, and that I ought to be prepared for my final dissolution which was then expected to take place from day to day. I was in the full enjoyment of my senses, perfectly conscious of my condition, and listened patiently and calmly to all they told me, and felt perfectly indifferent as to the result. I felt satisfied with the past and no particular hopes or apprehensions of the future. I thought I was on the dividing line between this world and the next, must continue to exist in the one or the other, was willing to take either, and felt no choice which. In short, during that four months of severe sickness, I enjoyed more peace and contentment of mind, more perfect freedom from all care and trouble, except occasional bodily pain, and more negative happiness than during any other similar period of my life.

That such should have been the state of my mind under such peculiar and trying circumstances, has ever been to me the subject of curiosity,

² He lived with a cousin, Daniel P. Rhodes, by name.

wonder and amazement. I can account for it upon no principle of philosophy or human nature, and now make this private record of the same for the purpose of seeing if future experience and observation shall solve the mystery.

Upon regaining my strength in the month of October so far as to be able to walk, I paid off all my bills occasioned by my sickness or otherwise and found I had about \$40.00 left. I then became reckless and adventurous, and determined to leave the place. Accordingly I took passage on a canal boat for Portsmouth on the Ohio River, thence on a steam boat to Cincinnati³, thence to Louisville,³ thence to St. Louis, Mo., remaining in each place a few days, without any particular object in view, and ready to embark in any adventure adapted to my taste and feeling which should present itself.

At St. Louis I soon found my small pittance of money was about exhausted, and that I must immediately engage in some employment there which would defray my expenses, or go to some place not far distant where I could do so. My first effort was to obtain a situation in some law office in the city, where I could write and perform office labor sufficient to pay my expenses, and during the rest of the time pursue my law studies. Here a difficulty presented itself which I had not foreseen and guarded against. I was more than a thousand miles from home, or from any person whom I knew or who knew me, and had no letters of introduction. Perceiving this difficulty I felt great delicacy in offering my services. Stern and impending necessity staring me in the face, I resolved at all hazards to make the effort. I first called on Mr. Bates,⁴ introduced myself and told him my business and situation. He received and treated me kindly and politely; and informed me that he had nothing for me to do; but would be happy to see me at his office, &c., for all which I tendered him my grateful acknowledgments and retired. After making a similar effort with like success with Mr. Spaulding, I paid my Tavern bill and left the city, going to Jacksonville, Illinois

At Jacksonville I formed a few acquaintances and attempted to get into business of some kind, say teaching school, clerking, &c., but without success. When I arrived at Jacksonville I had left one dollar and

³ He tried to secure work in each place but failed.

⁴ Subsequently attorney general.





MAJOR MURRAY McCONNEL.

twenty-five cents in money, and finding that would not pay my board more than one day at the tavern, I sold a few school books I had with me for a few dollars, and took up my lodgings at a private house, Mr. Heslip's, whose family I have known and esteemed ever since. One of my first acquaintances at Jacksonville was Murray McConnel, Esq., a lawyer of some reputation, who advised me to go to Pekin on the Illinois river and open a law office. I informed him that I had never practiced law, had not yet procured my license, nor had I any library. He informed me that he would furnish me with a few books, such as I would stand in the most need of immediately, and wait for the pay until I was able to pay him, and did so to the amount of \$30.00⁶ worth, which I received and subsequently paid him for. He told me that a license was a matter of no consequence, that I could practice before a justice of the peace without one, and could get one at any time I desired to do so. I concluded to take his advice, and consequently packed up my things and went to Meredosia on the Illinois river to take a steam boat to Pekin. Arriving at the River, I waited one week for a steam boat, and then learned that the only boat which was expected up the river that season had blown up at Alton, and consequently there would be no boat up until the next spring. What was now to be done? After paying my bill at the tavern, I had but fifty cents left. I could find nothing to do there, and had no money to get away with. Something must be done, and that soon, I enquired as to the prospect of getting a school, and was told by a farmer residing in the country a few miles that he thought that I could obtain one at Exeter, about ten miles distant; and if I would go home with him that night, he would go to Exeter with me the next day. I accepted his invitation, left my trunk at Meredosia, rode behind the farmer on the same horse to his home, and the next day we both went to Exeter. He introduced me to several citizens who were very polite and kind; but did not think a school could be obtained there; but if I would go to Winchester, eight or ten miles further they had no doubt I would succeed in obtaining one. I thought this was rather poor encouragement; but what was to be done? I was out of money, and still in too feeble health to perform any very arduous labor; and must do something to live; for I was too proud to beg. I

⁶ For this kindness never forgotten, Douglas secured the appointment for McConnel of fifth auditor of the treasury department.

therefore determined to go to Winchester and make another effort. Accordingly I parted with my friend, the kind hearted, hospitable farmer and taking my cloak on my arm, went to Winchester on foot that night. Arriving in the town, I went to the only tavern in the place, introduced myself to the landlord and told him I wished to stop a few days with him to which he readily assented. The landlord introduced me to the citizens generally, who seemed pleased with the idea of a new school in their little town, and in a few days obtained for me a subscription list of about forty scholars. In the meantime there was, on the second day after my arrival, an administrator's sale, at which all the personal property of a dead man's estate⁶ was to be disposed of at auction, and the administrator applied to me to be clerk at the auction, make out the sale bills, draw the notes, &c., which I very cheerfully consented to do, and performed the duty in the best style I knew how, and received five dollars for two days labor therein. About the 1st of December I commenced my school, and closed it about the 1st of March, having during the whole time a goodly number of scholars, and giving as I believe general satisfaction to both scholars and parents. During this period I attended to considerable law business before justices of the peace, and formed an extensive acquaintance with the people in that part of the county. There was considerable political excitement growing out of the veto of the U. S. Bank and the removal of the deposits by Gen. Jackson, or rather the removal of the secretary of the treasury because he would not remove the deposits, and the appointment of Mr. Taney in his place, who did remove them from the vaults of the U. S. Bank. One evening at the Lyceum, Mr. Josiah Lambert, a lawyer of some distinction from Jacksonville, made a speech, denouncing the leading measures of Gen. Jackson's administration, and especially the veto and removal of the deposits. He characterized the first of those acts as arbitrary and tyrannical, and the last as dangerous and unconstitutional. Being a great admirer of Gen. Jackson's public and political character and a warm supporter of the principles of his administration, I could not remain silent when the old hero's character, public and private, was traduced, and his measures misrepresented and denounced. I was then familiar with all the principles, measures and

⁶ Elihu Martin, deceased.



Building in which Stephen A. Douglas taught school. Winchester, Illinois.





IRA ROWEN.

The man who procured the pupils for Douglas' school. From an old photograph owned by his daughter-in-law, Mrs. H. J. Rowan of Galesburg, Ill., made in the early 60's.

facts involved in the controversy, having been an attentive reader of the debates in Congress and the principal newspapers of the day, and having read also with great interest, the principal works in this country; such as the debates in the convention that formed the Constitution of the United States, and the convention of the several States on the adoption of the Constitution, the *Federalist*, John Adams' work denominated a defense of the American Constitution, the opinions of Randolph, Hamilton and Jefferson on the Constitutionality of the Bank, and the *History of the Bank* as published by Gales & Seaton, Jefferson's Works, &c. I had read all of them and many other political works with great care and interest, and had my political opinions firmly established. I engaged in the debate with a good deal of zeal and warmth, and defended the administration of Gen. Jackson and the cause of the Democratic party in a manner which appeared highly gratifying to my political friends, and which certainly gave me some little reputation as a public speaker; much more than I deserved.

When the first quarter of my school expired I settled my accounts, and finding that I had made enough to pay my expenses, I determined to remove to Jacksonville, the county seat of the same (Morgan) county, and commence the practice of the law. In the month of March I applied to the Hon. Samuel D. Lockwood, one of the justices of the Supreme Court, and after a short examination, obtained a license, and immediately opened an office,⁷ being then less than twenty-one years of age. During the first week of my residence at Jacksonville the Whig (alias Federal Party) called a county meeting, and made speeches and passed resolutions denouncing the administration in the severest terms, and more especially in relation to the bank and currency question. The next week the Democrats called a meeting, one of the most numerous and spirited I have ever witnessed in that county. It was composed principally of farmers and mechanics, men who are honest in their political sentiments and feel a deep interest in the proper administration of the public affairs, although but few of them are accustomed to public discussion. It so happened that at that time out of twelve members of the bar there was not a Democrat among them. This meeting I attended, and at the earnest solicitation of my political friends, (for personal friends I had not then had time to form) I consented to make a

⁷ In the court house.

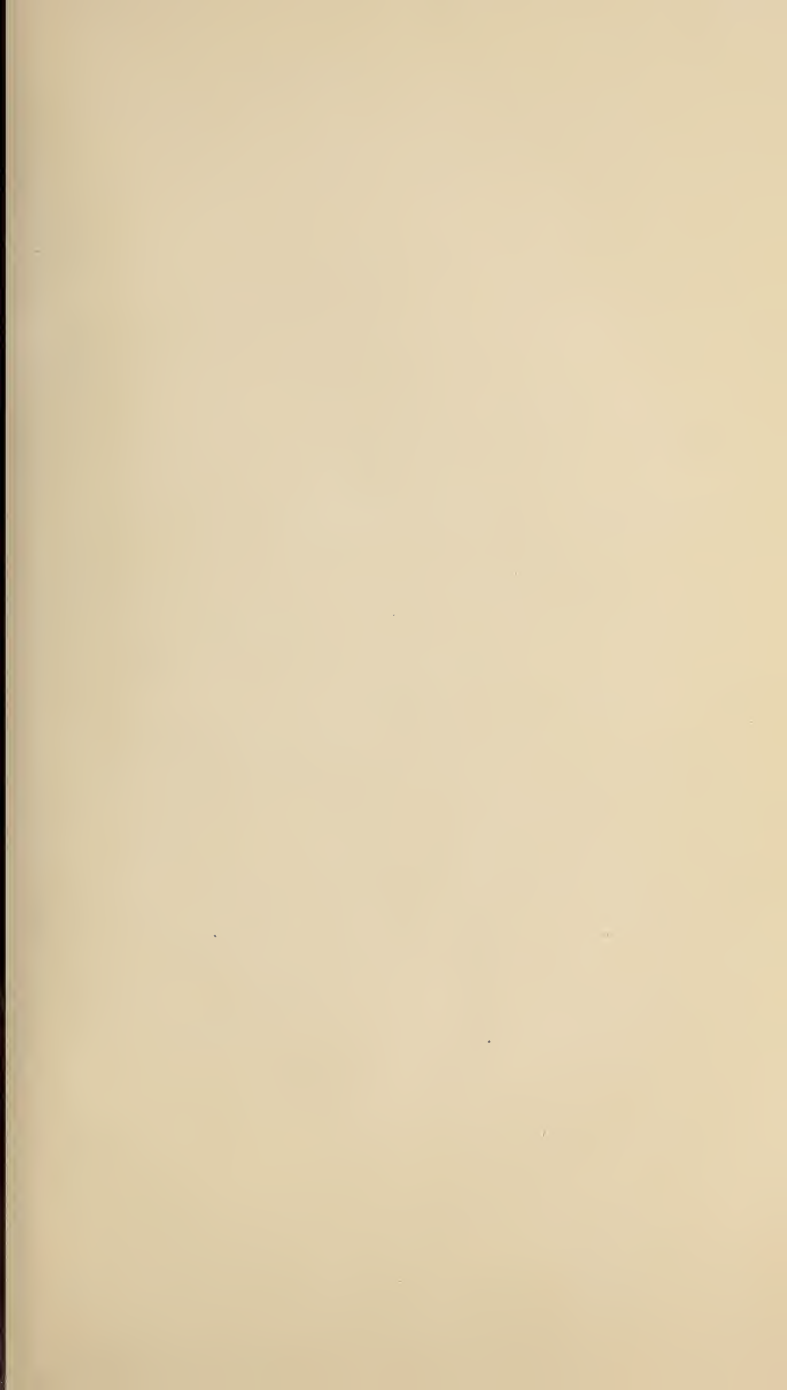
speech. The excitement was intense, and I was rather severe in my remarks upon the opposition;^{*} so much so as to excite the bitter hostility of the whole of that party, and of course the warm support of my own party. The next week the Patriot, the organ of the opposition, printed and published by James G. Edwards, Esq., devoted two entire columns of that paper to me and my speech, and continued the same course for two or three successive weeks. The necessary consequence was that I immediately became known to every man in the county, and was placed in such a situation as to be supported by one party and opposed by the other. This notoriety, acquired by accident and founded on no peculiar merit, proved highly serviceable to me in my profession; for within one week thereafter I received for collection demands to the amount of thousands of dollars from persons I had never seen or heard of, and who would not probably have known that such a person as myself was in existence, but for the attacks upon me in the opposition papers. So essential was the service thus rendered me by my opponents that I have sometimes doubted whether I was not morally bound to pay the editor for his abuse according to the usual prices of advertisements. This incident illustrates a principle which it is important for men of the world and especially politicians to bear in mind. How foolish, how impolitic, the indiscriminate abuse of political opponents whose humble condition or insignificance prevents the possibility of injury, and who may be greatly benefited by the notoriety thus acquired. I firmly believe this is one of the frequent and great errors committed by the political editors of the present day. Indeed, I sincerely doubt whether I owe most to the kind and efficient support of my friends, and no man similarly situated ever had better and truer friends, or to the violent, reckless and imprudent opposition of my enemies. Certain I am that without both of these causes united, I never could have succeeded as well as I have done. But I must forbear; for I find that I am philosophizing, which is far from my present purpose.

During the summer of 1834 my time was about equally divided between law and politics, reading and practicing the one and preaching the other. There was a general election pending for Governor, Congressman, and members of the Legislature, in which I felt no ordinary in-

^{*} He was carried away on the shoulders of his admirers and was dubbed "The Little Giant."



MRS. LIZZIE ROWEN HEXBY.
A pupil of Douglas.





MR. AND MRS. THOMAS PHILIP ROWEN.

terest and took an active part. I supported the Democratic candidates; William Kinney for Governor against Gen. Joseph Duncan, and Wm. L. May for Congress against Benjamin Mills, and the Democratic ticket for the Legislature in my own county. We lost our Governor; elected our Congressman; and a part of our legislative ticket.

At this time John J. Hardin, Esq., (now Gen. Hardin) held the office of state's attorney, under an appointment from Governor Reynolds, which then had two years to run. He had procured this appointment through the aid and influence of Col. James Evans, Col. William Weatherford, Capt. John Wyatt and other leading Democrats, every one of whom he opposed at the next election after the appointment. Capt. Wyatt was the only one of them who succeeded in his election, and was so indignant at Hardin for what he called his ingratitude, that he determined upon removing him from office at all hazards. The opposition having succeeded in electing their Governor, there was no hope from that quarter; and the only resort left was to repeal the law conferring the appointment upon the Governor, and make the office elective by the Legislature. At the request of Capt. Wyatt, I wrote the Bill, and on the second day of the session of the Legislature which commenced on the first Monday in December, 1834, he introduced his bill, and also another bill written by myself making the county recorder's election by the people, instead of being appointed by the Governor. I felt no peculiar interest in these bills any further than I thought them correct in principle, and desired to see them pass because my friends warmly supported them. Both the bills were violently opposed by the opposition (alias Federal Party) and advocated by a large majority of the Democrats, and finally passed by a small majority. When sent to the Council of Revision (composed of the Governor and Judges of the Supreme Court) for approval, they were both vetoed; the former as unconstitutional, and the latter because it was inexpedient. Then came a desperate struggle between the friends and opponents of the bills, and especially the states attorney bill. The opposition charged that its only object was to repeal Hardin out of office in order to elect myself in his place, and that the whole movement had its origin in Wyatt's malice and my selfishness and ambition. I will here remark, and most

solemnly aver it to be true, that up to the time this charge was made against me, I never had conceived the idea of being a candidate for the office, nor had any friend suggested or hinted to me that I could or ought to receive it. But from that moment forward, the friends of the bill declared that, in the event they passed the bill over the heads of the Council, I should be elected to the office. At this time I did not desire to be a candidate, for I had no reason to suppose I could be elected over so formidable an opponent who had been a long time a resident of the State, had fought in the Black Hawk War, and was well acquainted with the members. My short residence in the State, want of acquaintance, experience in my profession and age, (being only twenty-one years old) I considered insuperable objections. My friends however, thought differently, passed the bill,⁹ and elected me on the first ballot by four votes majority.

I will here remark that although I wrote this bill and reaped first fruits under it, and was inclined at that time to think it was correct in principle and ought to become a law; yet subsequent experience, observation and reflection have convinced me of my error; and I now believe that all Legislative elections ought to be abolished, and the officers either appointed by the Governor and Senate, or elected by the people. In this remark I do not mean to include clerks of our courts, whose appointments, I am inclined to think, ought to be vested in the judges.

Immediately upon my election as states attorney I procured all the standard works upon criminal law within my reach,¹⁰ such as Archbold, Chitty, Roscoe, McNally, Hale's Pleas of the Crown &c., &c.; and devoted myself to the study of them with a determination of making myself master of that branch of my profession. My official duties being exclusively within the line of my profession, I now applied myself assiduously to study and practice. How far I succeeded in this, I must leave to others, who are more impartial judges than myself. An amusing circumstance occurred in McLean county at the first court after my election as prosecuting attorney. The grand jury had found a large number of indictments for different offences, and I had been engaged

⁹ The bill was passed finally over the council's veto.

¹⁰ Daniel Roberts loaned Douglas these books. Wyatt loaned him the horse to ride over the circuit.



Old Court House, Jacksonville, Illinois. Built 1828. Vacated and torn down in 1872 or 1873.

all night in writing them, in great haste, in order to discharge the grand jury and enable them to return to their families. After the grand jurors were discharged John T. Stuart, Esq., came into court and moved to quash all the indictments, although he had been employed in but a small number of the cases. He stated his reasons for quashing the indictments, which were that they were presented by the "grand jurors in and for the County of McClean" when in fact there was no such County as "McClean," the true name of the County being "McLean". The manner of making this motion was very pompous and accompanied with some rather contemptuous remarks imputing ignorance to the writer of the indictments. Contrasting my youth and inexperience with the long practice and reputation of the opposing counsel, I considered his conduct extremely ungenerous, and more especially in a county where he was well acquainted with the people and I was an entire stranger. The moment the motion to quash was made and the objection was pointed out, it struck my mind as being fatal to all the indictments, and had it been done in a respectful and courteous manner, I should have made no objection to the indictments being quashed. When the Judge (Stephen T. Logan) asked me if I had anything to say in support of the indictments, I told him I did not consider it necessary as yet to say anything, Mr. Stuart having made the motion and having the affirmative of the question, the burden of proof of course rested upon him. That I presumed the court would not take official notice that I had not spelled the name of the county right until some evidence had been adduced to sustain the motion, and when such evidence should be produced, it would then be time enough for me to rebut such evidence. The court decided that it could not officially take notice of the precise mode of spelling the name of the county, and gave Mr. Stuart time to procure the statute creating and naming the county. My object was now accomplished; knowing there was none of the statutes to be found in the county, and that it would require a good deal of traveling, trouble and expense to procure one, which would sufficiently rebuke the gentleman's insolence; but not doubting that when the statute was produced, it would show that the defect in the indictments was fatal and they ought to be quashed. After a lapse of two days the Statute was procured from an adjoining county, and produced and read to the court by Mr. Stuart,

when to his astonishment, and I will say to the astonishment of myself and the whole bar, it appeared that the name of the county in the indictment was right, and that the learned gentleman did not know how to spell the name of the county he had practiced in for years. It turned the joke upon him so completely, and excited so much mirth and humor at his expense, that he could not conceal his chagrin and mortification. The indictments were all sustained by the court, much to my gratification. Some time afterwards I took the pains to compare this printed statute with the enrolled bill in the office of the Secretary of State, and found there was a misprint, the true name of the County being McLean. This small incident, although of no consequence of itself, has been an instructive lesson to me in the practice of law ever since, to-wit: Admit nothing, and require my adversary to prove everything material to the success of his cause. Every lawyer's experience teaches him that many good causes are saved and bad ones gained by a strict observance of this rule. During the time I held the office of states attorney, I conducted many important criminal prosecutions, and as far as I have been able to learn, acquitted myself in a manner satisfactory to my friends and the public generally.

In August, 1836, I was elected to the Legislature from the county of Morgan. The contest was a very spirited one, conducted almost solely upon national politics and party grounds. Each party ran a full ticket and strived to elect the whole ticket. The stump speeches were made, principally by Gen. John J. Hardin¹¹ on behalf of the Whig ticket, and by myself in support of the Democratic ticket. The contest resulted in the election of five Democrats and one Whig (Gen. Hardin).

On the 1st Monday of December, 1836, I resigned my office of states attorney, and took my seat in the Legislature.¹² It was during this session that Illinois embarked in her mammoth system of internal improvements. Before the election I had announced myself in favor of a general system of internal improvements, and was really anxious to see one of reasonable extent and expense adopted; but never for a moment dreamt of anyone's advocating such a wild and extravagant scheme as the one which was finally adopted.

¹¹ Hardin desired an election as a vindication at home. He was the only Whig elected in Morgan county.

¹² Twenty-three years old. Abraham Lincoln served in this Tenth General Assembly. It was the most notable in Illinois history.

William Douglas

Facsimile of signature of the first American Douglas, ancestor of Stephen A. Douglas.

When I learned the nature and extent of the bill which the Committee on Internal Improvements were maturing, I attempted to arrest it by introducing resolutions by way of instructions (see House Journal of 1836-7, page 36) setting forth the kind and extent of a system I thought ought to be adopted. My resolutions proposed 1st: To finish the Illinois and Michigan canal. 2nd: To construct a railroad from the termination of the canal to the mouth of the Ohio river. 3rd: To make a railroad from the Mississippi river to the Wabash to connect with the Wabash and Erie canal.

I was willing and anxious to make these three works on the faith of the State; but was unwilling to go further. I believed the canal to be an important State and National work, which would be useful to the government and people. I entertained doubts whether the plan of construction adopted by the commissioners was the best one that could be pursued, but rather than hazard the success of the work by differences of opinion as to the best manner of doing it, I determined to support and did support the bill which was passed that session. In fact the bill passed that session was a compromise bill written by myself and introduced by Capt. Joseph Napier of Cook county from a committee of which we were both members.

But to return to the internal improvements system; when it was ascertained from my conversation, speeches, and resolution that I would oppose the mammoth bill, its friends procured me to be instructed by my constituents to go for it. It must be remembered that at that day the people were for the system—almost en masse. So strong was the current of popular feeling in its favor that it was hazardous for any politician to oppose it. Under these circumstances it was easy to obtain instructions in favor of a measure so universally popular, and accordingly the friends of the bill got up instructions, which, from my known sentiments in favor of the doctrine of instruction, I did not feel myself at liberty to disobey. I accordingly voted for the bill under these instructions. That vote was the vote of my constituents and not my own. My own sentiments upon this subject are found recorded in the resolutions above referred to. If a limited and reasonable system, such as I proposed, had been adopted, instead of the one which did

pass,¹² I have no doubt it would have been entirely completed at this time, would be useful to the State and sustained by the people.

There was another question which excited much interest during that session. Immense numbers of applications were made for charters of all kinds and description; railroads, canals, insurance companies, hotel companies, steam mill companies &c., &c. I first attempted to arrest this whole system of legislation as unjust, impolitic and unwise. Failing in this, I next attempted to cripple it by inserting in each charter a clause "reserving the right to alter, amend or repeal this act whenever the public good shall require it."

NOTE: The original of the above sketch of Senator Stephen A. Douglas, of Illinois, is in a small blank book found among his private papers. It is in his own handwriting, hastily written and evidently never revised or continued. It is dated September 1st, 1838, when he was only twenty-five years of age, and does not extend beyond his service in the Legislature. It was evidently never intended for publication but may now have some public interest as the candid statement of the boyhood and early manhood of a young man who had bravely and successfully faced life's battle; and who was writing frankly purely for his own future information, and at a time when the circumstances were yet fresh in his mind. Autobiographies are generally carefully written in old age when the circumstances of early youth have grown dim, and perhaps unconsciously colored by the struggles and experiences of after life.

ROBERT M. DOUGLAS.

March 5, 1909.

¹² The State was bankrupt for years in consequence.

